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2020 Almanac of American Politics Preview: A Close Look at Voter Turnout



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It's no secret that the 2018 elections produced an unprecedented level of voter turnout for a midterm cycle. According to the United States Elections Project

(<http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data>) , voter turnout in 2018 was 50.3 percent, well above the 36.7 percent turnout seen in the 2014 midterms and the 41.8 percent in the 2010 midterms. While the turnout rate in 2018 wasn't as high as it was in the presidential election year of 2016 — it 60.1 percent for the Donald Trump-Hillary Clinton election — it was still unusually high for a midterm. But the 2018 turnout patterns are even more striking if you compare statewide vote totals for each party to the vote totals in the Trump-Clinton race. (Hat tip to Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (<https://uselectionatlas.org/>) for the data.)

In 2018, it turns out, a stunningly large number of Democratic gubernatorial and

senatorial candidates managed to exceed the number of votes secured by Clinton in their state two years earlier — a highly unusual pattern for a midterm election, when turnout tends to fall by roughly a third. In an even larger number of cases, Democratic statewide candidates fell just short of Clinton's vote level.

While Republicans in some states also notched impressive vote tallies for a midterm in 2018, the Democrats benefited from this phenomenon to a much greater degree than the GOP did — and they did so in more states that should be presidential battlegrounds in 2020.

This suggests a path for Democrats to achieve strong results in the 2020 presidential contest — if they can keep their voters energized. Let's take a look at how the state-by-state vote patterns changed between 2016 and 2018. (We ignored contests in which one of the races involved three candidates because these would skew the comparisons.) First, the Democrats.

In four states (Idaho, Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota) Democratic gubernatorial vote totals in 2018 were more than 10 percent higher than the party's showing in the presidential year of 2016. In six more, vote totals increased, but by less than 10 percent (Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, Nebraska, and New Mexico). And in 11 other states, Democratic votes for governor dropped by less than 10 percent from presidential levels (Alabama, Hawaii, Iowa, Michigan, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming).

All in all, that's 21 states in which Democratic votes for governor either exceeded the state's vote for Clinton or fell only modestly. Subtract a couple of states in which Democrats were blessed with unusually strong gubernatorial candidates in deep red states and that still leaves about 18 states where Democrats ran particularly strong statewide in 2018.

So how about the Republicans? While strong core support for Trump did help boost midterm turnout or keep shrinkage modest in certain states, the GOP's 2018 midterm performance wasn't nearly as strong as the Democrats' was.

In three states, gubernatorial votes for the GOP nominee increased over Trump's total by more than 10 percent (Maryland, Massachusetts, and Vermont). In four others, GOP votes

increased but by less than 10 percent (Arizona, California, Hawaii and Oregon). And in five states, GOP candidates dropped from presidential-year vote totals by less than 10 percent (Connecticut, Georgia, New Mexico, Texas, and Wisconsin).

All told, then, Republicans saw gains or modest losses in 2018 in 12 states. However, the strongest showings came in blue states where the party had broken with the Trump-era pattern by running a moderate candidate with crossover appeal. Subtracting those states leaves about nine states in which the GOP gubernatorial nominee overperformed Trump or didn't see a big fall-off.

In other words, the Democrats had roughly twice as many states where they fared unusually well for a midterm as the GOP did. Of course, some of those Democratic gains came in states that remain heavily Republican, making them "wasted" for the purposes of the 2020 presidential election.

Lots of them, however, are poised to be presidential battlegrounds for 2020.

The vote patterns show that Democrats were especially resilient in 2018 in eight presidential battleground states for 2020 — Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin. By contrast, the GOP showed similar strength in just five states — Arizona, Georgia, Texas and Wisconsin. And in two of the three states that made both lists — Georgia and Wisconsin — the Democratic performance was stronger than the Republican performance was.

To make sure that the 2018 gubernatorial races were not outliers, we also looked at Senate races using the same methodology. What we found is that the pro-Democratic pattern was even stronger with the Senate contests.

In five states, the 2018 Democratic Senate nominee outperformed Clinton's vote total by more than 10 percent (one of Minnesota's two contests, Montana, North Dakota, Tennessee and West Virginia). In another 10 states, the Democrat outperformed Clinton by less than 10 percent (Arizona, Hawaii, the other Minnesota race, Missouri, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming).

And in another 12 states, the Democratic Senate nominee limited the midterm dropoff to less than 10 percent (Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska,

Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Virginia).

That's a remarkable total of 27 states in which Democrats either increased their midterm vote haul or kept losses to a minimum. Separating out a few contests where Democrats had an unusually strong candidate for a red state, that leaves about 20 states where Democrats did unusually well in the midterm.

The differences with the GOP's 2018 Senate performances couldn't be starker.

In only one Senate race did the GOP see an increase between 2016 and 2018, and it was a bump of less than 10 percent — Washington state, where the mail-in ballot system keeps turnout high. In just two other states — Arizona and Texas — did the GOP keep the midterm dropoff smaller than 10 percent. And in both Arizona and Texas, the Democratic Senate nominee exceeded Clinton's vote total, while the Republican nominee fell a little shy of Trump's.

With the Senate races, as with the gubernatorial races, the Democrats can count several 2020 presidential battlegrounds among the states where they performed especially well in 2018 — Arizona, Florida, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin.

As one final check, we looked at the equivalent comparison for the 2008 presidential election and the 2010 midterms. That's the closest comparison for 2016 and 2018 because both involved wave midterm elections for the party not controlling the White House. Both involved an unpopular first-term president who cast a shadow over the midterms. The most notable finding is that, in contrast to 2016-2018, very few states saw vote increases between 2008 and 2010 — in either party. Not surprisingly, as the losers of the 2010 midterms, the Democrats saw only a handful of gubernatorial or Senate nominees improve upon Barack Obama's vote totals from 2008.

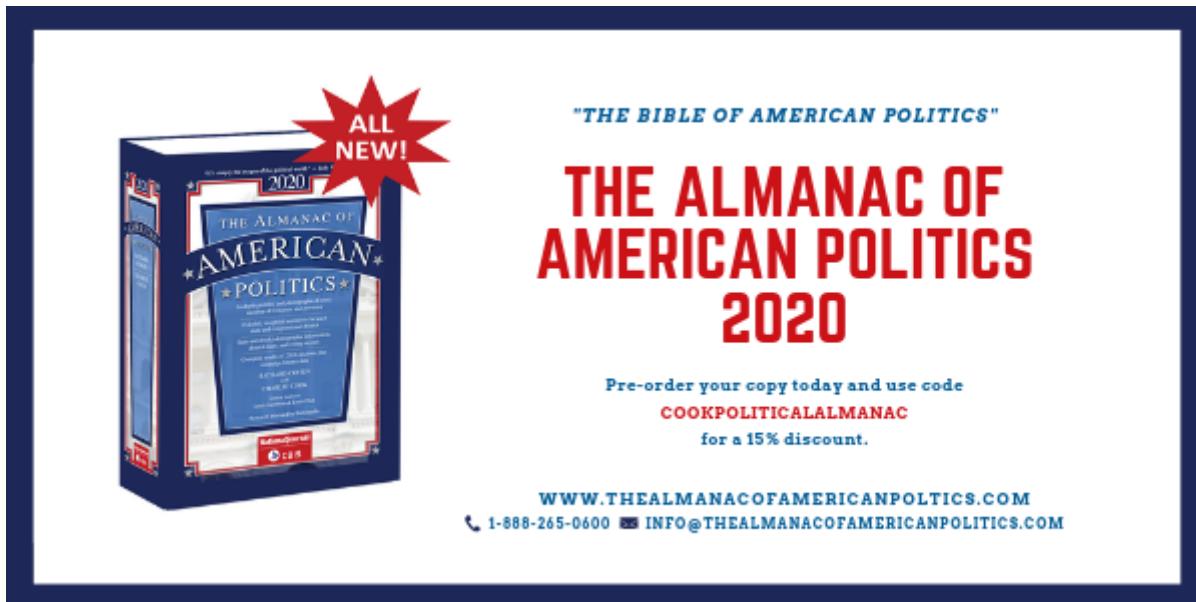
But even the winning party in that cycle — the GOP — was only rarely able to notch more votes than John McCain did in 2008. And only in two cases did those gains come in battleground states (Michigan and Nevada for gubernatorial races and Iowa for a Senate race).

In other words, the Democrats' strong midterm performance in 2018 stands out — not

just compared to the GOP's showing in 2018, but to both parties' results in 2010.

The bottom line: It appears that both parties have energized their bases enough to have goosed turnout in 2018 well beyond historical levels – but the Democrats did so more effectively than the GOP did, and they did so in a much bigger group of battleground states.

There's no guarantee, of course, that the Democrats can keep the same turnout dynamic going next year; a lot can happen between now and 2020, including the possibility that the party chooses a problematic nominee. But what the 2018 results demonstrate is that it's possible for the Democrats to drive historically high levels of supporters to the polls. Whether they can manage to pull off this trick again — and whether the GOP can up its own game for 2020 — remains to be seen.



(<https://www.thealmanacofamericanpolitics.com/>)

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